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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 003518

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: AOUN "RIGHT-WINGER" ON HIZBALLAH, MONEY,
RE-ENGAGEMENT WITH U.S.

Classified By: Jeffrey D. Feltman, Ambassador. Reason: 1.4 (d)

SUMMARY

1. (S) A Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) contact claimed to us that he represents a less-vocal, less-visible wing of the party that is anti-Syrian, skeptical of Hizballah, and which seeks closer ties with the international community. He says that FPM leader Michel Aoun himself is worried about the FPM's international standing and the prospect of losing Hizballah's support, and is seeking new political alliances and a rapprochement with the international community. Our contact claims that Aoun did not criticize Afghan President Hamid Karzai, that the FPM will not join Hizballah demonstrations threatened for mid-November, and that the party now has its own financing source in the form of the newly-launched Orange TV. Furthermore, he claims that the FPM is not cooperating financially with Hizballah. End Summary.

FPM: THE ANTI-SYRIAN WING

2. (S) Polchief met with Naji Hayek, FPM official and Aoun confidant. Hayek describes himself as a "right-winger" within FPM; he clarified that he and his comrades are anti-Syrian, anti-Hizballah and pro-West. Hayek contrasted his views with those of the most prominent FPM officials and MPs, and insisted that Aoun's security and intelligence cadres (of which he was once a formal member) are dominated by anti-Syrians, many of whom are aghast at the FPM flirtation with Hizballah led by Aoun son-in-law Gebran Bassil.

3. (S) Hayek dismissed Bassil, a frequent Embassy contact, as an opportunist and political arriviste consumed by personal ambition. No one knew Bassil before his engagement to Aoun's daughter in the mid-1990's, said Hayek, who became associated with Aoun during the Lebanese Civil War after a time spent fighting in Dory Chamoun's "Tigers" militia. Within the party, Bassil lacks all "street cred" and is seen by many as an insufferable, media-hungry upstart. Hayek suggested that Bassil's failure to win a parliamentary seat in the 2005 election left him desperate, bitter and radicalized.

AOUN YEARNs FOR RAPPROCHEMENT,
COULD DROP HIZBALLAH

¶4. (S) Hayek had met with Aoun the previous evening, and described the General as anxious about the current political situation and regretful of the increasing gulf between his party and the international community. Aoun explained to him, as he had on prior occasions, that he undertook his Memorandum of Understanding with Hizballah only as a result of being pushed into a corner by Mustaqbal and other March 14 forces. His political marginalization at their hands had led to the marriage of convenience. Aoun and his oldest followers are distressed, Hayek insisted, that the FPM is running afoul of Paris and Washington.

¶5. (C) Nevertheless, Hayek noted, Aoun is the most popular Christian leader and cannot be shunted aside within Lebanon. Replacing President Lahoud without consultation with Aoun and his people is inconceivable and would not be accepted by most Christians. March 14 figures, Hayek alleged, want to replace Lahoud with a Christian figure who has no popular support, regardless of political alliances. Such a weak president, he continued, could be controlled by March 14 and, if need be, replaced at will without consultation with the Christian community.

¶6. (S) In light of the importance of Aoun, Hayek continued, a rapprochement with the international community is desirable from both sides. Aoun could give up his condominium with Hizballah, but he "would have to be offered something" in return. Topping the list of desiderata would be a new electoral law guaranteeing fair representation for Christians. Another high priority would be for Aoun to be received in Washington. Even before the MOU with Hizballah, Hayek complained, Aoun's people were unable to get high-level

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meetings in Washington. Polchief pointed out several instances of USG engagement with Aoun and his officers to refute Hayek's point; however, Hayek noted, Aoun seeks the kind of senior-level meetings that confer a true USG embrace. Either the electoral law or a successful Washington visit could give Aoun the political capital he needs to leave Hizballah.

¶7. (S) Meanwhile, Hayek said, the FPM is seeking political flexibility to break the stalemate in which it finds itself in the face of the parliamentary majority. Aoun has secretly reached out to March 14 Group Transport and Public Works Minister Mohammed Safadi, a Tripoli MP who may be the second most popular Sunni leader in Lebanon, with a proposal to leave March 14 and bring his "five MPs" into an alliance with Aoun, Berri, Hizballah and other oppositionists to obtain close to half of the legislature. (Note: Safadi's Tripoli bloc consists of him and two other MPs, so it is unclear which other two MPs would follow him. End note.) According to Hayek, Safadi was initially tempted by Aoun's offer to make him Prime Minister but demurred on fears of becoming overly isolated among Lebanese Sunnis.

KARZAI, DEMONSTRATIONS AND FINANCING

¶8. (C) Asked about an al-Akhbar article which suggested that Aoun may have characterized both PM Siniora and Afghan President Hamid Karzai as U.S. puppets, Hayek denied that Aoun would have made such a remark. (Note: The article's wording was ambiguous, and the statement may have been attributed to Hizballah SYG Hassan Nasrallah. End note.) Aoun seeks good relations with the United States, he insisted, and would never gratuitously lash out at U.S. foreign policy.

¶9. (C) The FPM will not follow Hizballah into the streets, Hayek said, even if Nasrallah makes good on his pledge to organize demonstrations if the GOL does not negotiate a cabinet expansion before November 10. The FPM has never marched or demonstrated with Hizballah, he insisted.

Polchief pointed out that the two parties would have had a large joint demonstration on October 15 had weather not interfered. Hayek said that FPM supporters are highly skeptical of Hizballah supporters, whom they regard as something akin to "unwashed masses." However, those masses are not to be taken lightly; should Nasrallah march on Beirut, bourgeois Sunnis and bourgeois Christians won't have a chance to stop them. FPM officials strove to keep Hizballahis out of Christian neighborhoods when they marched in protest of the June 2 parody of Nasrallah on LBC, he said, asserting that the consequences of mixing Hizballah crowds and Christian crowds would be unpredictable. Despite Gebran Bassil's claims to the contrary, Hayek added, FPM's ability to coordinate street action and demonstrations with Hizballah is extremely poor.

¶10. (C) Finally, on the issue of money, Hayek was well-aware of the USG warning over FPM officials' possible handling of funds from the Hizballah-controlled Jihad al-Bina, and asserted that that problem was solved. The orange billboards all over Beirut, moreover, are funded by the newly-public company Orange TV, whose successful IPO was announced with great fanfare on October 25. While Orange TV is not an FPM arm in legal terms, it is clearly associated with the party and has been able to finance the billboards, which promote the TV station and the party simultaneously. Prior to offering Orange TV shares to the public, the FPM had no source of revenue, Hayek asserted. Party officials financed all their office and campaign expenses on their own.

COMMENT

¶11. (S) In all our recent conversations with FPM officials, they have seemed anxious about the party's poor relations with the international community and the durability of its arrangement with Hizballah. It never took a cynic to see that Hizballah and Aoun were using each other from the time they signed the MOU, but until recently party officials papered over any mistrust between the two with healthy doses of public embrace, Hariri-bashing, and patriotic jingoism.

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Now, flush with Orange TV money, eager to reestablish his anti-Syrian credentials, and perhaps wary that Hizballah may drop him first, Aoun has seemed more his own man in the themes that appear in his public statements. From his side, Nasrallah's October 31 call for mid-November demonstrations may not have been coordinated with the FPM at all.

¶12. (S) Neither Aoun nor Nasrallah have much of an alternative to sticking together, unless they are preparing new alliances that are more advanced than we are aware of. However, their combination increasingly appears to be a machine operating at two speeds at once. How such a political alliance, if that is a fair characterization, would hold up should either partner decide to challenge March 14 on the streets, is less clear now than it seemed during Ramadan.

¶13. (S) Both parties may end up in such a conflict, however, if current rhetoric continues to escalate. All sides are now making existential threats against their rivals. The FPM is threatening to bare March 14 figures' past corruption to the world, and Hizballah is threatening street-level action. Meanwhile, March 14 supporters have ceased coddling Hizballah and are raising complaints about Syrian influence, interference with the international tribunal's establishment, the damage wrought by Hizballah's July attack against Israel, and the impossibility of having elections while one party is armed to the teeth. Whether or not Aoun is seeking a way out, the tension is rising.

FELTMAN